DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 149 232 CG 012 102

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TITLE Variables in Research on the Psychology of Women.
PUB DATE 27 Aug 77
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association (San Francisco, California, August 26-30, 1977)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Behavior Theories; Biology; Cultural Factors; Cultural Opportunities; *Females; *Life Style; *Personality; *Sex Role; *Socialization; State of the Art Reviews; *Womens Studies

ABSTRACT

This paper argues that understanding women requires attention to four large classes of variables: biology, socialization, life chances, and personality. The implications of these variables are discussed. Emphasis is placed on intrasex variability, and on the need to study women as women, not in contrast to men. It is pointed out that female behavior and personality are affected by cultural expectations, which vary greatly around the world. Care must be taken, therefore, not to create new myths by making generalizations based on samples from only a few familiar societies. (Author)

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Variables in Research on the Psychology of Women

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In psychology the decade of the 1970's has been the most important for women in the history of our science. Growing research interest and the identification of large numbers of women psychologists with the concerns of women in general and with related issues embedded in the profession resulted in the establishment of Division 35, the Division of the Psychology of Women, and the appearance of its Journal, the Psychology of Women Quarterly. Reviews of research have appeared in the Annual Review of Psychology, and are appearing regularly in Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society. Textbooks and anthologies are now available and hundreds of courses in the subject are now in the curricula of colleges and universities all over the country.

A lush body of research is growing like Topsy, proliferating in many directions, and some have expressed concern for the seeming lack of organization and cohesion prevailing thus far. Others have suggested that this is a good thing, that we should not be too intent on an early definition of our field, or feel too strongly the need for imposing theoretical statements, when the corpus of research may be yet too fragmentary and patchy to support them.

But the studies are appearing, reminding us that the psychology of women is an area of study which cuts across most of the older subfields in psychology: social, developmental, physiological, abnormal, and so on. For example, recent issues of the Psychology of Women Quarterly have contained papers on professional role models, the antecedents of competence in girls, attitudes of Southern women, psychological adjustment of lesbians compared to heterosexual women, and the psychosocial factors of the abortion experience, to mention

Paper presented at the American Psychological Association Annual Convention, San Francisco, August 27, 1977.

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only a few. This interest in the entire spectrum of human behavior not only increases our knowledge and balances perspective, but applies a valuable corrective to the old biases in our scholarship.

A commitment to the systematic study of female behavior implies a recognition of past neglect and of the inadequacies of present theory, as well as an understanding that groups of women have in common certain attributes, experiences, and conditions of life which distinguish them not only from men but from each other. These require investigation, and the careful examination of old untried assumptions which inform beliefs and policies relevant to women.

The history of science is littered with false starts and blind alleys, and the history of the psychology of women is no exception. Time permits only a few examples.

Darwin's theory of the biological evolution of humans from lower species had a profound effect on all the life sciences, including psychology. As Schields (1975) has shown, the early functionalists were irresistibly drawn to apply its principles to behavior also: as our bodies had evolved from older animal forms, so had our behavior. Almost universally women shared with other female mammals a display of maternal and nurturing behavior. Such behavior could now be neatly explained by the postulation of a maternal instinct, a set of innate behaviors evolved in tandem with the reproductive system, and elicited instinctively by the presence of helpless infants. The attractiveness of this theory to explain the observations, and to serve the biases, of 19th century scientists, is obvious. Parenthetically, we see a reincarnation of this approach, dusted off and presented as a new idea, in sociobiology.

A second example is in the early literature on the achievement motive. Reports of studies using women as subjects were "ambiguous and inconclusive" (London and Rosenhan, 1964). Women's achievement behavior constituted an embarrassing anomaly to the developing theory. The solution to this problem in the early 60's was to disregard the anomaly and to study samples of males only. It is only recently that the achievement behavior of women is beginning to be understood, and even today its interpretation continues to excite controversy.

A third example of attempts to explain female behavior is in the well-known theoretical formulations of psychoanalysis. Freud's model of psychosexual development was based on the male, with a later tortuous attempt to adapt the theoretical umbrella to cover females as well. Likewise, Erikson's basic model for identity development was the male, the female's being contingent upon her selection of him who would be admitted to her inner space. For both of these, the extension of theory to cover the development of women came almost as an afterthought. They have in common their assumption of the male as the prototype human being, so that the female can only be understood in reference to him; and their invocation of a double standard whereby the female can only come out as "not male": if he is strong, she is weak; if he is dominant, she is submissive, and so on.

The last example of research for which the ratio of cost in time and effort to value is much too large, in my opinion, is the area of sex differences. The fact that humans occur in two biological types, male and female, has made the search for behavioral differences between them irresistible, as witness the enormous literature on the subject. But skepticism of the value

of all this for the psychology of women is warranted, I think, for these reasons: one, the practice of studying women by looking for ways in which we are different from men potentially reenforces the use of a model based on biological sex, male or female, as a standard for the understanding and evaluation of human behavior; two, such distinctions imply a dichotomy of opposites which is not justified. Woman is not the opposite of man, each of us being more like the other than either of us is like our same sex in any other species; third, a research focus on behavioral differences between the sexes is very weak as a method of developing information about so heterogeneous a population as women. The intrasex differences in most psychologically relevant variables are so large, and overlap between the sexes is so great, that identification by sex category offers almost nothing for reliable prediction of behavior.

Moving beyond the strategies of ignoring female behavior, or adjusting male models to fit the incidental other, or seeking the answers in differences between means of an imprecise measure of a polymorphous construct, we are now undertaking the study of women as women, using interdisciplinary conceptual tools and methods, and developing new ones as we go along.

How can we begin to understand so large and heterogeneous a group as women? Or a small homogeneous group? Or even a single woman? Understanding women requires that attention be given to several large classes of determinants which interact to influence the behavior of any particular woman, or narrowly defined group of women. These include biology, socialization, life chances, and personality. As determinants of behavior, they range from the widely shared (biology) to the unique (personality). To the extent that they are systematically different for women and men (as some of

them are more than others) they shape different outcomes for the two sexes.

Biology

In both the scientific and popular wisdom, the psychology of women has been closely tied to the events of their bodies. Theorists have sought explanations for women's behavior in the functions of their uteri, breasts, and vaginas (the maternal instinct), and researchers have looked for the demonstrable effects of these on behavior (the premenstrual syndrome).

Woman's body is productive of a number of uniquely female events, shared by nearly all women, affecting our experiential histories and the patterns of our lives. These events include the menarche and the rhythm of menstruation, pregnancy, labor and childbirth, lactation and the menopause. All are relevant to woman's role as childbearer and nurturer, and none of them has a counterpart in man's experience of his body. Thus the biological referents of the social roles of mother and father are not even comparable, let alone equal.

So far, however, the search for direct causal effects of these physical events and the attendant body changes on the behavior of women in general has been a fruitless one. Their effects are indirect, manifested through the consequences of these events and the meanings they have for the woman and for those in her social environment.

Menstruation, for example, does not noticeably handicap most women, but its meaning, expressed in customs and taboos, and beliefs about its effects have consequences for women far beyond its biological course. Pregnancy and childbirth are short term events with long lasting consequences. Given the role specialization and other characteristics of the nuclear family, and social expectations for motherhood, it is children rather than pregnancy which

change women's behavior and their lives.

The importance of biology for the psychology of women lies in the meaning of these events for women, men, and the society. Historically, her ability to reproduce was so impressive and so important that its related events and functions were also invested with great importance, and her identity became inseparable from her body and its uses.

A potent biologically based influence on woman's behavior was the sexual attractiveness to man of her body. In societies where the woman was dependent on the man for her life, as well as for any pleasure or privilege she might wish to have, it would have been strange indeed had not the goal of being attractive to him been of singular importance both as a determinant of her behavior and as a reenforcer of certain personality traits. Sexual attractiveness began with the body but extended, by cultural definition, to other characteristics which had to be cultivated as long as they were valued by him. Thus she had to learn to behave in ways that were appropriate to her place, to which she was assigned because she was born female.

Socialization

It is by now a truism to note that socialization practices in most societies are different for males and females and mediate different outcomes for the two sexes. The effects of differential socialization are widely observable in our own society, and pervade every area of contemporary life. The belief is widespread that socialization is the most important determinant of the observable differences in the lives of men and women. The literature on achievement, the Terman studies of gifted children as adults, studies of expressive behavior, of language, of sexual relations, of power differentials

at home and work all attest to the shaping power of sex roles and the inculcation of them in the young.

Yet all girls are not socialized alike, nor does the process "take" equally on everybody. Sometimes in reading the literature one gets the impression of a great smothering wet blanket of sex role socialization which is thrown equally over everyone and causes all little girls to be docile, nurturant, deferent and poor at math. Yet many girls escape this fate, and a growing body of literature is searching for and identifying the antecedents, in socialization practices, of competence and achievement in girls, and of the salutary relationship between mental health and freedom from so-called "feminine" personality traits (Baumrind, 1972; Baruch, 1976; Heilbrun, 1968; Williams, 1973).

While many studies have supported the positive values of moving toward androgynous norms for the socialization of children, we need more longitudinal studies of the effects of certain practices, and studies of the antecedents of characteristics now defined as healthful and positive for girls and women.

Life Chances

Life chances are differential opportunities which result from such factors as race, ethnic group, geographic and political influences, economic resources, physical characteristics, and so on. Life chances for women, as for men, vary enormously over the world. Her sex has always been a major determinant of woman's life chances everywhere, the fact that she was born female being the most important determinant of what she would be doing thirty years hence. Today the chance that a woman has to escape from traditional role requirements and to exercise some control over her own life depends to

a substantial degree on the country, class, and ethnic group into which she was born. Child-rearing practices, important as they are, only reflect these variables and the value systems associated with them.

Our present literature on the psychology of women is overwhelmingly concerned with and reflective of the experiences and behavior of middle-class white women in Western society. While this is understandable at this stage in the development of the field, we should be careful to qualify our generalizations, and try to avoid becoming as culture-bound in our thinking about women as we have accused others of being. What is the relevance, for example, of our research on achievement motivation to women in the developing countries, where high fertility rates, illiteracy, lack of access to education and employment, and powerlessness in social institutions are the norm for women? If one grants that education, employment opportunity, the right to self-determination in one's personal life, and participation in public life all convey power on the person who has them, and that the extent to which one has power or is powerless relative to others is a determinant of behavior, then these factors become important to the psychology of women.

Personality

Although theorists emphasize different aspects of the various factors which contribute to the development of personality, most would agree that the outcome is determined by the experiential history of the person, the kind and degree and pattern of experiences she has had, impinging upon and affecting the development and maturation of the basic or innate qualities that were there at birth. Thus the uniqueness of the developed personality comes about through the interaction of the person's unique experiential history, which

begins at birth, with a unique set of "givens," the result being an infinite array of individuals, no two alike.

The importance of this for the psychology of women is that intrasex variability is very large, a fact that is often forgotten in the enthusiastic search for sex differences. Acting on a spectrum of predispositions which may become manifest at different maturational levels are thousands of complexes of events producing reactions which are themselves events, all shaping the personality of the individual woman.

Since there is no convincing evidence that women are more like each other than men are, one would expect to find as wide a range of differences among females as among males. Therefore, instead of grouping the universe of women under such personality rubrics as "women are verbal," or "women are nurturant," we need to know more about the parameters of female behavior, what are the norms and variabilities of female behavior, how personality attributes are distributed in different populations, and how they mediate different results in different experimental and natural conditions.

Females differ on such personality characteristics as dominance, creativity, conventionality, susceptibility to fear, willingness to take risks, self-esteem, and so on. While this assertion seems obvious, we do not yet know enough about such individual differences and how they interact with group variables, such as social class, to produce behavior.

A related problem concerns the tradition in personality research to consider personality traits to be dimensional, that is, to assume that persons are characterized by some degree of the trait in question. For example, the oft-heard statement"women are dependent" implies a dependence-independence

continuum, with women clustered at one end and men at the other. It should be obvious that dependence can be defined in many ways and that a person can be both dependent and independent, given her own disposition in the requirements of a given situation. A woman, for example, may be emotionally dependent on the support and gratification she receives from a special person; at the same time, she may be quite independent in the conduct of her life, in supporting herself, in making decisions, and so on. In personality research on women, individual differences in emotional and instrumental dependence affect responses to situational variables, as do other characteristics of the individual.

In addition to normative studies and individual difference studies, it has been suggested that we give some attention to the now-defunct study of the single case (Carlson, 1971). Current methodology in personality research essentially treats people as carriers of the variable under study, their idiosyncratic qualities being simply "noise" which, by random assignment to experimental groups, will cancel out. Longitudinal studies of individuals, and the use of such archival material as letters and diaries, while unorthodox by present research criteria, could lead us to more naturalistic kinds of observation and to better understanding of in vivo behavior - which is where most behavior actually occurs.

Each person, it has been said, is like all other persons, like some other persons, and like no other person (Kluckhohn and Murray, 1949). These categories describe the contributory sources of behavior that we have been talking about: biology, socialization, life chances, and personality. By no means are these independent of each other. Rather, they interact to determine the behavior of a woman or group of women at any given time. Their relative

importance, too, may vary in a given situation, in a given time, in a given life.

And everywhere exceptions abound.

Though our bodies and their functions are more like than unlike, they aren't all used in the same way. Women, as John Money reminded us (1965) menstruate, gestate, and lactate. But not all women gestate and lactate. Most women are less muscular than most men, but some Central African tribes believe the opposite, that men are not suited for heavy work, which is done by the women (Albert, 1963).

Though we are socialized into sex-appropriate behavior, there is not universal agreement on what is appropriate. Among the Zuni Indians it is the male who looks forward to his wedding night with fear and apprehension (Albert, 1963), and the Iranian male is expected to be sensitive, emotional and intuitive, while the woman is supposed to be logical and practical.

The destinies of many women are a result of the particular circumstances of their lives. No woman can become a writer or a scientist if she is illiterate, or a politician if women in her country are secluded in their homes.

As for personality, each one is different. Considering the sources of diversity, it seems that generalizations about the psychology of women will be valid only for narrowly defined and specified groups. If we are careful in our search for commonalities, we shall create no new myths as impediments to the inquiry of the future.

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